

# WILLIAM CRAGO

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## Mine boy at nine years of age

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### HIS STORY

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SOUTH CARADON MINE  
LISKEARD

June 20th 1878

I have pleasure in stating that William Hy Crago of Tremar Coom has worked under me for some years and during that time he has been a respectable, honest and well behaved youth, one I can confidently recommend to any person requiring a confidential and useful servant.

*John Holman*

John Holman.

## "My first day in a Copper Mine in Cornwall"

At the very early age of nine years my Father told me one evening that on the following Monday morning I was to go with him to the mine to commence work as a miner.

During the interval which elapsed between receiving such information and the arrival of the Monday, my dear Mother was busily employed in getting together my outfit, which consisted of a Canvass jacket and trousers, a Flannel shirt and pants, boots (without any socks) and a hat hard enough to resist an hard blow from any solid substance that so often falls on the miners head when employed in his dangerous occupation.

On the Monday morning at half past four a clock, I received a call from my Father intimating that it was time for me to get up, having had breakfast we were soon on our way to the Mine.

Upon arriving there I was taken into the changing house, that is a building erected for the purpose of drying the Miners clothes in each day after coming out of the pit. A man is employed solely for the purpose of looking after the clothes, to each Miner is allocated two pegs on which to hang his clothes and a third on which to hang his hat. I like the others soon had my allotted place, and at the proper time divested myself of my usual wearing apparel and I put on for the first time the full dress of a Cornish Copper Miner.

Our first duty after donning these clothes was to go to the Blacksmiths shop where all the tools used by the Miners are sharpened by men appointed to that duty and duly placed by them in racks or lockers where they may be found by the Miners upon their arrival at the Mine.

Each locker is numbered as also are the drills, picks, gads, moils. Our number at that time was 502 and my Father took me to the locker bearing that number and taking from thence a piece of rope about eight feet long with a running noose at each end (called a borer sling) he proceeded to take out several pieces of steel ranging from one to two and a half feet in length (and called drills or borers) he invited me into the art of securily fastening these with the rope and you will imagine how necessary it is for them to be so fastened when I tell you that the mode of carrying these drills down into the pit is by slinging them across ones shoulder.

We then went to the store house and procured a supply of powder, fuse, candles, clay and paper. (Dynamite was not at that time 1869 in use in the Cornish mines.)

I will now describe to you what our loads were that we had each to carry down into the pit to a depth of 1,600 feet.

My Father had the borers before mentioned and weighing from perhaps 15 to 20 pounds. On his left arm a (keg) small barrell of water for drinking purposes, in his right hand two picks. I had on my right arm about 5 pounds of black powder carried in a copper can, on my left, a coil of fuse to be used with the powder for blasting purposes, in my pockets, gads, used for splitting rocks, and each of us a fair sized potato pasty for our dinner.

Picture us then, wending our way to the mouth of the pit and imagine what my feelings must have been wondering how I should manage to get down with that load. We arrived at the pit's mouth in company with several other men and boys and of course I had to put up with a great deal of good humoured chaff as to my personal appearance and as to the sights I should see when I got some distance down.

My Father thought it wise that we should not start until all the others had gone down and I soon had proof of the wisdom of that decision.

After all the others had gone we stepped into the ladder-way and went down about 20 feet to the first landing. Father then produced matches and lit our candles. (I should say that in all

"Cornish Mines" no other light is used but the tallow candle about 12 to the pound.) Having lit our candles, some clay was wrapped around it and it was then stuck to front of the hard hat before mentioned.

When this had been satisfactorily done my Dear Father said "now my son, do you think you can manage". I said "yes Father". He then said "when you are on the ladder, never look down, hold tight, your hands and your feet will find their way", and then putting his hand upon my shoulder, he asked God to protect us throughout the day. (A practice I may say he always followed during the ten years I worked with him.)

During the time the above mentioned had been taking place, our companions had got a considerable distance down, but not so far but that we could hear their voices ringing up the shaft as they sang that beautiful hymn, "Sowing the seed by the wayside high". It is a common practice among Cornish miners to sing when going down the mine.

But to proceed, we at last stepped into the footway, Father first and I following him, very carefully we descended the first 480 feet. It was almost like climbing down the side of a house and as we slowly went along, ever and anon came Father's warning voice "Hold tight your hands, my son".

As I have before said, the first portion of our downward course was like climbing down the side of a house. The portion of the shaft we were now about to descend was termed the underlie Section, and it may be interesting if I here give you the explanation as to why this should be.

Throughout Cornwall, all Copper veins run almost due east and west, some of them are almost perpendicular, while other veins run in an underlie direction, either to the north or south, the shaft therefore that we had first descended for 480 feet had been sunk on a perpendicular vein and at that depth had struck into another vein underlying to the south, and as the rocks in which this vein was running was of a much softer nature than that in which the perpendicular shaft had been sunk it was decided to sink on the softer vein, thereby saving a great deal of expense and making the labour of climbing up and down much easier.

When the ladders are upright the strain of climbing comes almost entirely on ones arms whereas if the ladders are on the slope the feet have to bear a much larger portion of the weight of the climbers body, and so I found on resuming my descent, it was very much easier to climb down this portion than I had hither found it, but with that advantage I found there was attached to it a great disadvantage. You will readily imagine that in most mines there is a great quantity of water and as a rule the Cornish mines are very wet indeed.

It is not only the water that is found while sinking the shafts and driving the levels, but the surface water which finds its way down gives a great deal of trouble to the miner engaged in sinking operations and very much inconvenience when climbing up or down.

It is not pleasant to have a small stream of water dropping just on the back of your neck and running down your back and legs into your boots and then have to work in that state for 7 or 8 hours, but such was the fate of most of those who worked in that portion of our mine.

We continued what seemed to me our interminable journey down into blackness, my legs were aching, my back was stiff and sore, and my hands were getting benumbed with the continual clutching of the ladder rungs and it was quite necessary that Father's warning shouts be given "Hold tight your hands".

After about two hours climbing (I was soon able to do it as quickly as most boys) we reached the 1,600 feet landing stage, and I for one felt extremely thankful to step out of the ladder onto what appeared a much safer place, but in order to enter the subway we had to cross the shaft

on what appeared to be a very narrow plank and great caution is necessary in so doing, however, this was safely accomplished and we entered the mouth of the subway. My mind when climbing down the pit had been filled with wonder by what I had seen, but now a fresh source of wonderment appeared to view.

The operations of the miner while sinking the shaft are confined to a hole usually 15 feet long by 9 feet wide, and even if the shaft is sunk in the view of copper, no time is spent by him in proving the surrounding rock, he has to burrow down as fast as possible, taking due care to secure the rock and which, after all his care, sometimes falls upon him and hurries him into eternity without a moments warning.

To those who follow him is left the task of proving the quality of the vein to the east and west of the shaft and the subway entered by us had been explored in an easterly direction.

The mouth of this subway, or level, as we call it was about 6 feet high, and at the bottom about 4 and a half feet wide narrowing to about three feet at the top. The necessity for its being broader at the bottom than at the top arises from the fact that a small tramway has to be laid down in order that the mineral from the distant workings may be brought to the bottom of the shaft, and then hauled in kibbles or skips to the surface. We proceeded along this level and both above and below soon had evidence that we were in a very rich part of the mine, and that men had been busy here extracting the treasures of the earth. Great caverns were over and below us, and our road was on narrow boards laid on supports fixed crossways in these caverns so that great care has to be used in picking one's way along. (I should here say that the tram rails are attached to these cross pieces.)

We continued our journey for about half an hour and then came to another level branching off to the right. This level was driven for a very considerable distance through the solid rock and at last intercepted the vein of copper at the 1,600 feet level which we had left that morning at the bottom of the perpendicular shaft or at the 480 feet level.

You will thus see the wisdom of having sunk the shaft in the soft ground from the 480 to the 1,600 feet. Not only had this been done at a much less expense, but they had been able to explore the one branch for 1,120 feet in depth and more than half a mile in length and had been able to drive a cross-cut (that is what the intercepting levels are called) and so intercept the perpendicular vein at a depth of 1,600 feet thereby throwing open large sections of ground which afterward produced thousands of tons of copper ore.

But to resume our journey, we had just reached the end of the cross-cut and turned into the level driven on the load when I heard a loud rumbling noise which set my heart beating faster than usual. I asked my Father what it was. He said that is tram wagon coming towards us and we had better stand aside here and allow it to pass. We stood up in a recess, and presently we could see the faint twinkle of the trammers light like the star shining out on the distant horizon which gradually grew larger as the wagon approached. He passed us with a cheery good morning to my Father and continued on his way pushing his heavy load of mineral out to the shaft.

We, too, went on our way and after crossing more narrow boards, we arrived at a spot where several coats were lying about, also several of the kegs of water. I noticed that each of these coats was placed on a piece of wood, giving one the impression that down in that dark cavern men were accustomed to sit down and rest awhile after the fatigue of the journey down, and such it really was, truly this was a "place of rest neath the shadow of a great rock", for 1,600 feet of solid rock stood "twixt us and daylight". To me that morning, it was indeed a place of rest, when, Father throwing off those heavy drills from his shoulder and putting down his keg of water, he bade me put down my load and pointed out to me a board on which I could sit.

True it is, my first seat was on a hard board, but it was to me as welcome as any couch or chair I have sat on since, for, remember, we had climbed 1,600 feet and had walked rather

more than a mile through the dark wet caverns and that, to me, "a boy 9 year old" for the first time was a big undertaking.

I could now hear that we had arrived at the spot where the miners were at work for I could plainly hear the tick, tick, of the picks and the thud, thud of the hammers of those who were drilling. I believe that boring machines such as those that were shown at the "Inventions Exhibition" a few years since are now in use "in most hard ground mines", but in those days, man's labour was the only force used in boring down into the hard rock.

We sat down on the seats before mentioned and Father said "it is nearly crib time, me son" (that is dinner time), so we will wait until the other men come out, but before they do so they will blast the holes they have been drilling and "mind the doesn't get frightened". Surely, I thought, there can be nothing worse than what I have already passed through, but how soon one's most cherished dreams gets scattered like the morning dews.

We had not been sitting there long before I heard a voice at no great distance from us shout out in ringing tones "Fire". Father said "look out me son, it will not hurt you", and then in a moment it seemed to me as though the rocks were rent in twain and were lashed back at each other again falling with a tremendous crash upon the floor of the subway in which we were seated, and then from out of this noise and smoke came two forms, clad, it is true, similar to myself, but whose faces were as black as the sweep's just returning from his morning round.

These were two of the men who had been with us at the pit's mouth in the early morning but their morning's work had made such an alteration in their appearance that I did not recognise them until they spoke.

One of these was a man about forty years of age, and was, as we used to say, "one from the west", that is he came from the mining district of the western part of Cornwall.

His name was "Carlyon" and seeing me sitting there I suppose looking frightened "any way I felt it" he addressed me in the following manner. "Was the matter sunny, art a skeard". I said "Is you". He said "What art a skeard at un?" I said "at that hole that went off. I thought the place was seat, in pieces you". At this there was a general laugh in which I joined and while we were laughing several other explosions took place and really, I felt I had had enough of mining for one day. By this time several other men had come out of the noise and smoke reminding one of "Tennysons" famous charge of the Light Brigade.

When all had seated themselves to their several likings, each produced his dinner, you know already what my Father's and my own consisted of (Potato and meat Pasty). I may say that it is a favourite article of diet with the "Cornish Miner" as it is very convenient to carry, and if well made, very nutritious.

I am afraid I am unequal to the task of painting with sufficient vividness the picture of that, my first dinner hour in the mine. There was not much conversation during the time the pasties were disappearing, but after these had been disposed of and the pipes had been produced. For many miners smoke, and smoking is not prohibited in non gaseous mines, then the miners tongues seemed let loose.

This man "Carlyon", who had previously spoken to me again addressed me as follows, "well me son, how's a like coming down the bal". I said "aw alright so far". He said "has the Father told thee the first art in mining it". I said "I deden think he had, what es it". He said "well me son the first art in mining es to law to fool the Capn". So that the first lesson according to him should be to make a fool of my Foreman. Whether or not I took his advice I had better not say.

Dinner time down in the pit, as in more luxurious places has its ending and when the time was up each man went off to his respective place of labour, and Father and I again taking up our

loads went to our pitch, as we term it, which was some 50 yards from where we had been sitting. Perhaps it would not be amiss if I were to explain here the system under which the tributers take their monthly contracts. Two men usually take a piece of ground 10 fathoms long and 10 fathoms high and they must retain this contract for one month at the price agreed upon between them and the Manager on the servey day. The mode of letting the bargain is carried in the following manner. Two men whom we will call John Brown and John Jones have been working on a section of ground and now wish to renew their contract. One of the Captains has been down to inspect their place of work and according to his judgement of its present worth has fixed a certain price at which he thinks it ought to be worked. The Manager then reads out of a large book as follows, John Jones. A pitch to extend from Martins rise ten fathoms east and from the 90 to the 100 fathom level by two men. Jones then calls out the price he thinks he ought to have which we will say was 10 shillings. The Manager then replies "10 shillings is asked, going at the price of 8 shillings in the pound." If Jones approves, he says put it down, John Brown with him. If he declines it, it is then open for anyone to take it at the price offered by the management.

Now to resume my story. It was not my Father's intention to do much work on that day, but simply to introduce me to the various portion of our work and to show me how I should have to go on from day to day. I will now describe to you the place in which I was to commence work as a miner. I have already said that this particular vein of copper was perpendicular and that the height of the level was about 6 feet, but as I was rather short and my Father not over tall we were obliged to put in some staging. That having been done, we got upon it and were then better able to see what the vein was like. We found that it was fairly rich and that on its south side there was a narrow strip of what we called flukin which could be broken away with the picks, and that with the use of gads and moils but the granite at the North side of the lode was what is locally termed "glassy" and well do I remember in after days how my arms have ached when drilling holes into that rock.

You no doubt think that some of our tools have queer sounding names, the flang, gad, moil and others. The flang is a long pick used for digging when the vein is narrow, it is almost flat at the eye through which the handle passes. They are made in that manner so that when the portion of the vein which may be broken with a pick is narrow the miner may have good reach in digging in order to make good room for blasting purposes. The poles of these flangs are about three inches long and are used for driving the gads into the harder portions of the rock. I sould like to read here an extract from a London director's letter to his brother, respecting these gads. This gentleman had been sent down by the Company to inspect the mine, and upon arriving there, he introduced himself to the Captain and stated his object in visiting the mine. "Well", said the Captain, "was thee want to see", to which he replied, "I want to see the mine and shall feel obliged if you will proceed to show it to me and to speak in a more becoming manner to your superior." "Aw my dear, iss sure comes on then", said the Captain. They then proceeded down the ladders but had not gone far before they met a man, an 'object', the gentleman called it, who, upon being questioned as to where he was going, said "I am going to grass". It is a common saying with miners, who, when the day's work is done, instead of saying are you going the surface, say "Are e going to grass". In his letter the director says he was much shocked at this, but even that was nothing to what followed. He says "we had not gone much further down the dirty hole before they say another of these 'objects'." The Captain asked him to what pair he belonged. The director then says I considered this a fair opportunity for displaying my superior education and informed to Captain that his question should have been "What tribe do you belong to?", the Captain received this with a broad grin and said, "Aw, you had better ask un yerself". "And so I will, sir", I replied. I spoke out very boldly to it and said in a loud audible voice, "What tribe do you belong to". The creature placed a dirty thumb to his nose and said, in a very plain English, "To the tribe of Gad".

Oh, what a wonderful discovery my dear Charles, is this, who could have thought of finding one of the descendants of Gilpah in such a place? This Gadite also accompanied his information with a broad grin, and I fancied he uttered some such sounds as Bufflehead and Droozenhead as he went up the filthy ladder". Such is a London directors' description of the tribe to which I belong.

But to go back to our place of work, we did not do much, but as Father said only threatened it what we should do. There was one thing in those early days which I could not understand, it was this. On the north side of that vein, the rock was almost as hard as iron and the copper against this ground was also very hard, while on the south side, the rock was quite soft and the copper against this was also soft. I have sought information on this subject from specialists, but at present the answer is not forthcoming. Their theory of mining is very nice, like many other theories, but the practical part of it is a chapter from an entirely different book. Frequent sounds of explosions now began to be heard indicating that the time had come for us to 'go to grass'. The men now began to assemble at the place where we had had crib, some with heavy loads of blunt drills, some with empty powder cans, others with blunt picks, and all looking weary and tired from their exertions of the past six or seven hours, and yet the hardest part of our day's work remained to be done (viz), to climb up 1,600 feet to the surface. However, by steady plodding we all safely arrived at the top to see the daylight and to breathe the pure air once more, and never shall I forget the look of joy and thankfulness that lit up my Mother's face as we arrived home.

Such, then are a few of the incidents of my first day in a Copper mine and with the exception that the wonderment wore off and that I was soon able to climb up or down, beat a borer or use a flag, drive a gad or wheel a barrow as well as most boys, they are fairly descriptive of the daily occurrence of ten long years, long as they were passing, but not so long to look at them now they are gone. Of course I have both seen and suffered from accidents, fortunate the miner who does not meet with them. One I will mention, which nearly cost me my life. I was about fourteen years old and had been working nearly five years when an invention was brought into use in our Mine, it was called 'The Man Engine'. By its use we could ride up and down to our work without scarce any climbing. It was one of the greatest blessings ever introduced into the mines. It would take me too long to fully describe its working to you but it will suffice for me to say that an engine at the surface has attached to it a rod about ten inches square which it raises up from or drops down into the shaft twelve feet at each stroke. To this rod is attached steps and when the miner is going down, he steps on to this step and goes down twelve feet, then steps off on to the landing and waits for another step to come up. Of course the man coming up waits for a step to come down, he steps on it and is soon taken by this means to the surface. On the morning on which I met with this accident we had rode down about eighty fathoms that turned into the underlie section of the shaft when in some unaccountable manner the rod seemed to slip away from under us and I was thrown head foremost into the shaft, striking my head as I fell and almost losing my ear and very severely injuring my left side. I fell on a piece of wood which crosses the shaft and there hung on until rescued by my Father, and thank God escaping with my life. Other accidents I have met with of a more or less serious character, and that I have escaped death, while it has overtaken so many of my comrades, is a matter for which I am most devoutly thankful.

I often think when I hear our Ministers from the pulpit praying for our soldiers and sailors that the miner might be equally included with them, for though the two former protect our land from an invading foe, sail our ships across the seas, bringing us many of the necessary comforts of life, does not the miner toil deep down in the dark caverns of the earth for the precious minerals contained therein, his life exposed to constant danger, or as a poet put it, "He carries his life in his hand, while engaged at his dangerous toil".

Think then, of the "Copper Mines" as your handle, your bright new pennies, of the "Tin Miners" as you look at your bright new kitchen utensils, and as you sit by your bright fireside on a cold winter night, think of the collier, and when offering up your thanks to the giver of all good do not forget the toilers in the mines:

W.H. Crago. A miner for ten years in South Caradon Copper Mine, near Liskeard, Cornwall.

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